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Regional Seminar on Antipersonnel Landmine Victims

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Regional Seminar on Antipersonnel Landmine Victims

Bogotá, Colombia
12-14 November 2003

Executive Summary

More than 125 representatives from across the Hemisphere met in Bogotá from November 12 through 14, 2003 to take part in the “Regional Seminar on Antipersonnel Landmine Victims,” sponsored by the Organization of American States Mine Action Program, the Mine Action Information Center of James Madison University and the Office of the Vice President of the Republic of Colombia, and made possible with financial support from the Department of State of the United States. The purpose of the seminar was two-fold. First, it aimed to bring together experts and practitioners in the field of victim assistance from national and local governments in mine-affected countries, donor nations, and nongovernmental and international organizations to share experiences and evaluate the possibility for new partnerships. In addition, several landmine survivors from throughout the Americas participated in the seminar, offering some unique perspectives on the issue.

Second, the Government of Colombia offered to host the event because of its intense interest in improving national capabilities for addressing the special challenges that confront landmine survivors. Colombia has reported more landmine victims than any country in the Hemisphere, and according to *Landmine Monitor*, all but two of the country’s 32 departments are now mine-affected. To date, the Colombian Antipersonnel Mine Observatory has identified and registered 2,515 landmine victims, of which at least 36% have been identified as civilian victims.

Due to the magnitude of this crisis, and the complexity of the landmine issue, the Government of Colombia has sought international assistance through the OAS Mine Action Program. In March of 2003, the OAS signed an agreement with the Colombian Government for the initiation of an assistance program for a comprehensive approach to mine action in the country. Because Colombia is believed to be the country with the greatest number of landmine victims in the Hemisphere, the seminar was given high priority for OAS support. Under the framework agreement, the OAS Mine Action Program has already provided advice and technical assistance to Colombia in the areas of mine-risk education, database development and mine stockpile destruction.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Francisco Santos Calderon, Vice President of the Republic of Colombia and President of the National Intersectorial Commission on Mine Action, highlighted the challenges confronting Colombia as it works to meet its obligations as a signatory to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Antipersonnel Mines and on their Destruction, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention. Speaking on behalf of the OAS Mine Action Program, Colonel (Ret.) William McDonough outlined the issues that the seminar would address, including data collection on mine victims, emergency and continuing medical care, physical and psychological rehabilitation, training and social reintegration, and program coordination. Mr. Dennis Barlow, director of the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University, concluded the inauguration by calling on the participants to share their personal and institutional experiences with their counterparts from other nations and different institutions.

Representatives of mine-affected countries in the Americas – Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Peru - provided an overview of the landmine crisis in each of their countries, highlighting their capabilities and needs. Following their presentations, Captain (Ret.) Oscar Buitrago of Colombia and Mr. Richard Villadiego, both Colombian natives, offered personal testimonies about their life-changing experiences as landmine survivors. Their accounts provided insight into the pain, suffering, psychological trauma and challenges they have faced in undergoing the rehabilitation and reintegration processes needed to recover as productive members of society. They also

brought to light the lack of immediate medical attention that is available in many rural areas and the need to make landmine victims aware of their right to assistance from their governments.

Seminar activities included panel discussions incorporating leading experts in the fields of treatment, rehabilitation and training. Among the panelists were speakers from the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining; James Madison University; Physicians for Human Rights; Central Military Hospital of Colombia; Queen's University of Canada; Integral Rehabilitation Center of Colombia (CIREC); the Health Services Unit of Health ECOPETROL, the Colombian national oil company; Landmine Survivors Network; the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines; World Rehabilitation Fund; National Demining Commission of Nicaragua; and Rotary Club of Colombia.

The panels were followed by three working groups which reflected the different topics discussed during the panel discussions. The group on "Data Collection" concluded that victim information collection should be decentralized and submitted to a centralized national authority where it must be verified according to established standards for data collection. A second working group on "Medical Care and Rehabilitation" identified requirements for immediate and continuing care of landmine victims as well as for educating family members of victims about the processes and facilities that they require. The third working group on "Social Reintegration" highlighted the need to take advantage of available national, regional and local capacities to provide psychological assistance, promote local survivors' networks, and enhance public and employer awareness about landmine survivors' capabilities as means of improving their socio-economic reintegration.

The seminar concluded with a presentation of regional perspectives from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of the Canadian Government, United Nations Development Program, and United States Agency for International Development. In closing the three-day seminar, Mr. Tomas Concha Sanz, Vice Director of the Colombian Government's Human Rights Program, reiterated the commitment of his government to assist the landmine victims and work toward eliminating this threat to the civilian population.

The regional seminar afforded participants the good opportunity to share their views on regional landmine issues, as well as on projects that they are implementing or planning to implement. Participants had the opportunity to exchange ideas in best practices and lessons learned in this important humanitarian field. The gathering also helped broaden and strengthen existing networks of cooperation between governmental, nongovernmental and international entities in a way that promises to produce new partnerships and projects that will benefit landmine survivors in Colombia and throughout the Americas.

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